

No longer “friends and partners”

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Boris Johnson’s thuggish, bullying brand of politics with regards to Brexit is not only poisoning domestic debate in the UK, its menace is being felt across Europe.

Many Europeans tuning into Parliament’s deliberations pick up on being designated the enemy. This is likely to make it harder to negotiate an alternative withdrawal agreement, while also spelling trouble for negotiating a future relationship in an adversarial atmosphere.

European leaders are starting to feel very wary of the UK, which seems increasingly intent on playing retrograde and antagonistic balance of power politics on the continent. When the Prime Minister uses the phrase “our friends and partners” to describe the EU, it nowadays rings hollow if not downright creepy and menacing, like a mafia enforcer calling the subject of his shakedown friend, or a Stalinist torturer calmly calling his victim comrade.

Europe has felt menaced by the UK since long before Brexit and Boris, but that feeling has increased since the 2016 referendum. This helps explain why there is no chance of a deal that would leave the EU even more exposed to the kind of British strong-arm tactics it feels it has had to deal with over the last couple of decades.

Since Johnson ascended to the leadership of the Tory party, Europeans have begun to wake up to the heightened threat from Johnson and the extremist Brexiteers that he seeks to appeal to. The UK correspondent for the German daily Süddeutsche Zeitung wrote after last week’s parliamentary ruckus: “The man is not just unscrupulous, he’s dangerous for Great Britain and the EU.”

The UK's own European Commissioner for the Security Union, Julian King, tweeted: "Crass and dangerous. If you think extreme language doesn't fuel political violence across Europe, incl UK, then you're not paying attention".

The European project has always been a speculative and aspirational undertaking that is easily given to self-doubt and destabilization. How could it be otherwise when bringing all the disparate parts of a continent together, with all its different peoples, languages, cultures, interests etc. The whole exercise is akin to corralling greased weasels. The British fear, nurtured by political expediency, of a Machiavellian, meddling and masterful EU is, and has always been, wide off the mark.

Much has been made of the way the UK entered the EEC as it was at the time, following a veto by France's president Charles de Gaulle in 1967. While the French leader was undoubtedly acting from self-interest and concern over his country's influence, it is worth at least considering his words when he warned that the UK joining the bloc could lead to: "the destruction of an edifice that has been built at the cost of so much hardship and in the midst of so much hope."

Fifty years on, just two years ago, the former French Prime Minister Edith Cresson, a socialist, not a Gaullist, estimated that de Gaulle had been correct in some of his concerns: "Formally they'd be in, but actually they'd always be with the Americans." While British closeness to the Americans might be a particularly French concern, there seem to be divergences between the continental and the Anglo-Saxon views of the state and of the balance between self-interest and European cooperation.

This has led to the UK time and again probing the limits of the mere robust defence of its interests by demanding rebates, opt-outs and renegotiations. The other countries up to a point acquiesced because of the importance of keeping the UK on board.

Although much smaller than the combined total of the EU, the UK has wielded outsize influence as one of the bloc's major economies, largest countries and biggest military powers, amplified by its obstructionist behaviour. And so, the idea of being bullied by the UK has taken root in Europe over the decades. When Johnson became

Prime Minister, well before the recent escalations, an ally of Germany's Angela Merkel's tweeted: "Dear @BorisJohnson: Neither boastful speeches nor bullying will succeed in making us give up #EU principles and unity."

Of course, all sides play politics and make such charged statements for effect but there lie some real concerns and historical sensitivities behind this. Take the backstop and the Irish border: The EU is genuinely concerned about its internal single market being compromised and about the effects on Ireland and Northern Ireland.

But hackles have also been raised because it's a bit rich that the UK is now showing such apparent disregard for the Good Friday agreements, while earlier Ireland had agreed to stay out of the EU's Schengen free-travel area and in a Common Travel Area with the UK, precisely in order not to damage those peace agreements.

Another sign of the distrust that the UK has engendered in Europe is the reaction to the increase in the British talk of divergence. This is both seen as posing the danger of realising de Gaulle's original fear of the UK becoming an American outpost in Europe as well as at creating a "Singapore in the North Sea".

Taken together with the Prime Minister's recent incendiary rhetoric, the EU cannot but crouch into a defensive position. Maybe this is what Johnson and his advisors want, in order to blame the bloc for any failure to reach a compromise. But that doesn't change the equation that while inside the EU, the UK has been able to get a better deal than most by using robust tactics.

Now that it is leaving, the other EU countries are going to be less likely to be bullied into compromises that they see as being harmful to their own interests.

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